

RUSSIAN LITERATURE, MODERNISM AND THE VISUAL ARTS

EDITED BY

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CHAPTER I

Defining the face: observations on Dostoevskii's creative processes

Konstantin A. Barsht

The visual aspects of Dostoevskii's creation have often been neglected in critical writings. This is partly because of the post-Bakhtinian emphasis on multiplicity of voicing and instability of meaning in Dostoevskii, and partly because the conventional polarisation between Tolstoi and Dostoevskii as opposites has meant that 'spectacularity' in Dostoevskii has been associated above all with the dramatic force of his fiction (as opposed to the obviously 'visual' qualities of Tolstoi's). Yet Dostoevskii's diaries and manuscripts reveal that the visual arts were extremely important for the writer both as consumer and as practitioner; while references to paintings and to visual representations have a pivotal role in his works. More generally, a familiarity with Dostoevskii's interest in the visual, and with the iconic aspects of his imagination, is vital to interpretation of his fiction, as will be demonstrated here.

ENVISAGING THE HUMAN PERSONALITY: DOSTOEVSKII AND THE *LİK*

For Dostoevskii, the writer's main task was to create a 'face' that expressed an 'idea'. This 'personalised image of the idea', or *lik*, comes to take a central place in his aesthetic credo; it was with it in mind that he created the heroes of his own works and assessed the literary characters of other writers. For Dostoevskii the supreme value was not simply 'human life' in any form, but the 'human facial image' (*chelovecheskii lik*) in particular, its quality of single and unrepeatable individuality: the unity, in other words, of the internal (the 'idea') and the external (the face) in man – the unity of the facial image (*lik*). 'A man's face is the image of his personality, his spirit, his human worth.'¹ These words of Dostoevskii could stand as an epigraph to any of the portraits he created, be they literary or visual.

Each of the writer's works is in essence composed of a number of portraits drawn by literary means, a number of 'faces' facing each other, each one fronting its own 'idea'. Contemporaries of Dostoevskii felt this more acutely than the modern reader: they saw *The Brothers Karamazov*, for example, as a 'whole little gallery of family portraits'.² The scope of this practice is all-encompassing: Dostoevskii was constantly turning over in his imagination the images (*liki*) of various ideas, even when he was examining the works of professional painters.

In his comments on the face of Christ in Ge's painting *Tainaia vecheria* (The Last Supper) Dostoevskii noted that 'Titian . . . would have given this Teacher a face like the one he gave him in his famous picture "Render Unto Caesar"'; then many things would have become clear at once.³ Although in this particular case Dostoevskii is talking about painting, as he 'fits' an image created by Titian to a subject depicted by Ge, he viewed not only painted portraits but also the faces of the people around him in exactly the same way. Gazing intently at faces was one of the writer's favourite activities and formed an important part of his creative processes. Prefacing a whole series of street sketches drawn 'from nature' in his 'Little Pictures' (*A Writer's Diary*, 1873), Dostoevskii states quite clearly how they were done: 'When I wander about the streets I enjoy examining certain total strangers, studying their faces and trying to guess who they are, how they live, what they work at, and what is in their minds at this particular moment.'⁴ He immediately offers the portrait of an artisan and his apprentice as a practical example of this 'gazing' and 'divining': in the character's face the writer sees his life, his personal tragedy, his personality. In the way he perceived reality Dostoevskii was uniquely close to a painter: he tried to grasp the essence, spirit and 'idea' of a man through his external features, his face; he always conceptualised the object of his attention from two points of view – both as something universally human, typical of everyone, and as something profoundly original and unusual. The crucial factor in this 'image-ining' (*obrazhenie*) of man is the portrait painter's ability to look deeply into a face and read it like an open book. In essence, this is also the work of a physiognomist, who employs a particular method to divine the secrets of the human personality that are somehow concealed in the features and expression of a face. Dostoevskii was no less preoccupied than any portrait painter by the relationship between human character and its

embodiment in portraits. The greatest difficulty was that man is constantly changing and at any moment of his existence is not identical to himself, is 'not like himself'. Straightforward documentary accuracy does not necessarily render adequately the human image: it is not often that we are happy with photos taken of us, and we often 'do not recognise ourselves'.

With this in mind, it is interesting to note that Dostoevskii did not himself like viewing his own face in the mirror. He seemed to dissolve his appearance in his view of the world, a view whose intensive actuality did not allow him to switch to a 'view of himself from outside'. This apparent paradox is explained by the essentials of the writer's artistic credo. When he looks in the mirror, a person sees only the reflection of his external *oblik*, which is not at all the expression of the *lik* that Dostoevskii's heroes (and the writer himself) were searching for. A person cannot from within look at himself from outside: an ethical 'short circuit' takes place, and the only way out of this is to create a special external point of view on oneself and the world which by definition cannot coincide with the 'I-for-myself'; to create, in other words, a literary hero. A beautiful woman who spends hours sitting in front of the mirror, whether she is doing her make-up or not, is carrying out – albeit for a different purpose – the same work as a poet: she is creating a special 'ideal' view of herself from outside by moulding an ideal object (creating a 'face', to use Dostoevskii's term). The difference is that the beautiful woman sitting in front of the mirror aims to make her own individual face identical with a model selected according to a particular set of aesthetic norms; the writer, on the contrary, creates the face of a hero by making it as dissimilar as possible to all the models he knows, by searching for a 'face of uncommon expressions'. A second distinction is that a person sitting in front of the mirror regards the face as the end meaning of their activities; the artist regards the face as a means to an end, and aims to find a connection between the human face and the Face of the universe. This explains the strange feeling a person experiences when standing in front of a mirror: he tries to view his expression as a 'sign of himself' (and the more he gazes at his own reflection, the more this feeling intensifies). The skill of a make-up artist working on himself is to view the world from within, using face-paint to bring his appearance, which he treats as something quite separate from his *lik*, as close as possible to a hired model. The position of a writer is diametrically opposed to this: he must go

beyond the limits of his existential location and try to see the world from the viewpoint of another being. For this reason the mirror no longer remains essential and in fact the reality it presents becomes rather terrifying; at the same time, the hero's identity becomes defined autobiographically as his 'I' is displaced in time and place.

For Dostoevskii, the creation of a literary hero is an attempt to see the world through the eyes of another person who feels his tragic separateness from the world, while at the same time this hero is (being) defined through the eyes of yet another, third, person, who views him sympathetically from a position alongside him, and inhabits the same chronotope. Thus both the hero of the novel and the narrator (chronicler) are born.⁵ The writer absolutely had to *see* his hero. The secret of Dostoevskii's envisioning of his heroes opens up a little when he describes how *seeing* the hero was a precondition for *hearing his voice*; the one was impossible without the other. Not for nothing does Ivan Karamazov, in notes Dostoevskii wrote for *The Brothers Karamazov*, complain to the devil that 'I sometimes no longer see you, but only hear your voice.'⁶ The visual image of what was to be embodied ('the individual face' or 'the face of the idea') prepared the ground for Dostoevskii's utterance of the 'individual word', as opposed to the 'general word'.

Dostoevskii's extremely concrete aesthetics was never a pretext for abstract philosophical speculation: it expressed urgent and essential questions which defined the course of his existence both as a man and as an artist and provided a foundation for the encoding of his own texts and his perception of art in general. It is hard to speak of Dostoevskii's literary portraits: there are no portraits as such, there is just the impression made by one man in the eyes of another, as they together make contact with and/or are repelled by Beauty/Truth. The description of the hero's portrait is based on the Old Russian *zhitie* which presents the 'face (*lik*) of a man' who has made contact with Truth (or, as often happens in Dostoevskii, rejected it); in just the same way the writer's drawings on his manuscripts are based on the icon, as a genre that evokes the likeness of man and God. According to Dostoevskii, art, by requiring of the artist love for the subject of depiction irrespective of the morality of the face being depicted, places him in the position of the Christian obliged to love his enemy. This idea, which is highly revealing of the national specificity of Russian art, figured large in the writer's reflections, and made it possible for him to link art with Christian morality.

The recollection of a 'face' that he had once seen and been impressed by was the writer's starting-point when he came to create artistic form. Dostoevskii often has recourse to this technique in his works, thereby revealing to us the particular features of his creative process. Characters systematically hang portraits of each other on the walls of their flats, and the semantic context of their locations is no less important than the domestic environment of the hero himself.⁷ It should be noted that the hero of any Dostoevskii novel always sets great store by the depiction of a woman (and never that of a man). We may see this as a 'cryptogram' of Dostoevskii's own habits: he himself treasured several portraits of this kind, including a medallion with a depiction of his first wife, M. D. Dostoevskaia.⁸ More often than not Dostoevskii expressed the idea of the suffering of good and beauty in this world in the form of the sufferings of a beautiful woman. He conveyed this by leaving his hero in front of her portrait; the word 'obraz' thus took on a dual meaning, and every portrait of this kind has something of the Orthodox icon – a window on to Truth, which guarantees Good and the path to which is Beauty.

In the novel *A Raw Youth* Dostoevskii does not restrict himself to reflections on the 'principal feature' of a face but also feels the need again to make sense of a *lik*. He suggests the connection between man and the universe through the reflection of the Divine Face in man:

It was also a photograph, very much smaller, in a delicate oval wooden frame – the face of a girl, thin and consumptive yet, despite that, beautiful, a pensive face and at the same time oddly devoid of ideas [. . .] as if this were a case of a person suddenly seized by some fixed idea which was tormenting for the very reason that it was beyond the power of that person to comprehend it.⁹

The highest expression of love in Dostoevskii is to gaze lovingly into the face of a person, to seek spiritual communion with his or her *lik*. On the other hand, the highest expression of hatred is to destroy a portrait (or else to treat it outrageously, or to slap someone in the face). In *The Insulted and the Humiliated*, the incensed old Ikhmenev 'snatched up the locket, threw it violently on the floor, and started trampling it with his foot in a frenzy'.¹⁰ To destroy someone's image is, in the understanding of Dostoevskii's heroes, equivalent to murder. After disfiguring the medallion, the old man 'stopped short, horrified at what he was doing. Suddenly he snatched up the locket from the floor and rushed towards the door, but he had not taken

two steps when he fell on his knees, and dropping his arms on the sofa before him, let his head fall helplessly on them.¹¹

For this reason, a crucial role in Dostoevskii's works is allotted to visual depictions of people, all kinds of portraits and especially photographs. It is with a photograph that Prince Myshkin begins his acquaintance with Nastas'ia Filippovna in *The Idiot*: staggered, he whispers quietly about 'beauty that can overturn mountains' (both consciously and involuntarily he refers us back to the formula in the Gospels about Christian faith with which one can move mountains). In *The Insulted and the Humiliated*, when Katia arrives to meet Natasha, she tells her that she has seen her photograph, whereupon an ethical and aesthetic comparison of two expressions of the 'human face' immediately ensues:

'Well, is it a good likeness?'

'You're better.' Katia replied resolutely and gravely. 'But I was quite sure you would be.'¹²

Dostoevskii uses this motif persistently. In *A Raw Youth* Arkadii, when he meets the heroine, already knows her by her portrait:

'I can't stand your smile any more!' I screamed out suddenly. [. . .] 'When I got here I spent a whole month before you arrived gazing at your portrait in your father's study and not making any sense of it. [. . .] You've got a full figure and you're of medium height, but you've got the full, light plumpness of a healthy country girl. Yes, and you've got a country girl's face, the face of a country beauty [. . .] a round, red-cheeked, clear-skinned, bold, laughing and . . . and unassuming face!'¹³

It is hard to imagine a situation where these remarks on a woman's 'full plumpness' could be addressed to her without violating nineteenth-century norms of decent behaviour. Such a situation would in practical terms be impossible. But this description is not intended to be heard by the heroine: in essence, it is the transcript of the writer's internal monologue as he formulates the portrait of his heroine's 'face' – it is directly analogous to the sketch created by Dostoevskii as he planned the novel.

A low parodic variation of this technique of revealing the meaning of an event through a 'face' is found in the story 'The Crocodile', where Elena Ivanovna, the wife of a man who has just been swallowed by a crocodile, is distraught that she has no photograph of her spouse. Dostoevskii's thought about the 'principal feature' can therefore take many different forms in his artistic practice.

THE VISUAL IMAGE AS PART OF DOSTOEVSKII'S CREATIVE PROCESSES

When he puts something down on paper, the writer does not simply fix something he has thought over during the artistic gestation period, but also establishes a connection between this thought and its future artistic form. For this purpose Dostoevskii created his own kind of 'mediating language' which helped him to connect the 'input' language of his internal speech and the language of artistic form that he created. The writer must carefully cultivate the linguistic form of his future work. An idea which has been prematurely and inadequately embodied in a word, turn of phrase or expression does not assist but rather hinders the further progress of artistic creation. Of course, this 'pre-verbal' possession of an idea varies from one writer to another depending on the particularities of their education, upbringing, era and creative style; and, naturally, by no means all of them assisted this process by drawing sketches as Dostoevskii did. Indeed, Dostoevskii went even further than sketching by creating his own special 'ideography': it was characteristic for him to 'sketch in his mind', to use the words of the writer himself, the 'full image' of the artistic idea, and to accompany this mental sketch with movements of the pen on paper which reflected the processes of creative thought. We know that Dostoevskii, while engaged in 'the poet's work', often gave free rein to his fantasy with interesting results: images succeeded one another at lightning speed, but sometimes the writer stopped to 'gaze into' the hero he had created at length. We also know that it was precisely while he was taking this extended look at the personality and *lik* of his character that he usually sketched out his 'portraits'. But what was going on in the writer's consciousness at these moments? Did he pause to consider the meaning of a technique of literary creation that had become the norm for him?

We find interesting evidence on this question in *The Diary of a Writer*, where Dostoevskii recounts that as a convict, though he was deprived of the opportunity for normal literary activity ('with a pen in my hand'), he still could not check the impulse to make an artistic response to his environment and began to 'sketch pictures' in his mind. Dostoevskii recalls this as follows:

Little by little I lost myself in reverie and imperceptibly sank into memories of the past. All through my four years in prison I continually thought of all

my past days, and I think I relived the whole of my former life in my memories. These memories arose in my mind of themselves; rarely did I summon them up consciously. They would begin from a certain point, some little thing that was often barely perceptible, and then bit by bit they would grow into a finished picture, some strong and complete impression. I would analyze these impressions, adding new touches to things experienced long ago; and the main thing was that I would refine them, continually refine them, and in this consisted my entire entertainment.¹⁴

We see here that the ‘full picture’ grows out of a ‘point’ or ‘feature’, but the means by which the writer achieves success in the ‘work of a poet’ is still far removed from his operations with words and verbal expressions: it more closely recalls the technique of a professional painter who ‘corrects’ his picture with calculated light strokes and thereby brings his work to a peak of artistry and authenticity. One feature of graphic art – of any type or level of professional expertise – is that it is operated by a particular kind of ‘retrospective connection’: every stroke, feature and line defines the following ones, just as words are defined by their context as they enter speech or writing. The process of drawing is thus not a simple transferral on to paper of some picture formed in the mind’s eye, but rather a constant ‘correction’, the careful examination and completion of what has been drawn earlier, an analysis that continues even as the image is being realised.

Professional artists and photographers, to continue the above analogy, are remarkable for their ability to create precisely *portraits* of people where the subjects open up in the fullness of their internal essence. Dostoevskii penetrates deeply into this problem decades in advance of the appearance of art photography in its present form. One of the heroes of the novel *A Raw Youth*, Versilov, remarks as he holds in his hands a daguerrotype of his wife Sonia:

You know . . . photographs are only very rarely good likenesses, and one knows why. It’s because the original, I mean each one of us, is only rarely a good likeness of himself. Only at rare moments does a human face express its chief feature, its most characteristic idea. An artist can study a face and gauge its main idea, though at the moment he copies it it might not be on the face at all. A photograph captures a person as he is at one moment, and it’s very likely that Napoleon at such a moment could appear stupid and Bismarck kindly. In this particular portrait the sun deliberately seemed to catch Sonya at the moment when her chief feature was visible, her shy, timid love and her rather challenging, fearful chastity.¹⁵

The essence of the discovery made by Dostoevskii is that the creation of an individual portrait is also a quest for the typical, but the portrait conceals not a multitude of similar people united by a single fate, but a multitude of different faces belonging to one and the same person.

To be able to glimpse man at this characteristic moment, when his internal and external aspects, his personality and biography are united, is the main task facing a portraitist, both in painting and in literature. This is why Dostoevskii accords such an important role to the *liki* of his main characters, who gaze into each other just as intensely as their author with exactly the same aim – to 'divine' the meaning of the 'idea' concealed in a person. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, after Dmitrii's disgraceful sally in the Elder Zosima's cell, Zosima puzzles the assembled company by bowing down before him. When asked by Alesha about the meaning of this bow, Zosima explains: 'I sensed something terrible yesterday . . . it was as though the look in his eyes had revealed his whole destiny. [. . .] my soul shuddered momentarily at what the man was laying in store for himself. I have seen that kind of expression on people's faces once or twice before in my life . . . as though it revealed the whole of their destiny, and their destiny, alas, came to pass.'¹⁶ Dmitrii's face expressed the 'chief feature' of his life and his fate, both of which the Elder is able to 'read' just as Versilov 'reads' the face of his wife on a photograph. The 'terrible fate' imprinted on Dmitrii's face could only be overcome with the help of the fraternal *lik* of Alesha Karamazov. 'I sent you to him, Aleksei, because I thought that the sight of a brother's face would help him.'¹⁷

Any novel or story by Dostoevskii is crammed with physiognomical investigations of this kind. There are quite a few of them in *The Diary of a Writer* as well. Whenever Dostoevskii in his articles raises the question of how to create a literary depiction of man, he invariably touches on this area. Not only that, if his characters demonstrate the ability to 'read people by their faces', this is an important indication of their spiritual development and moral qualities. For Dostoevskii's 'author-heroes', 'chroniclers' and narrators, a constant and careful study of the faces around them provides the absolute foundation for their view of the world. The discoveries made by the 'author-heroes' are of course a reflection of their creator's opinions. The 'Dreamer' in *White Nights* confesses that:

whether I walked on the Nevsky, went to the garden or sauntered along the embankment, there was not one face of those I had been accustomed to meet at the same time and place all the year. They, of course, do not know me, but I know them. I know them intimately, I have almost made a study of their faces, and am delighted when they are cheerful, and downcast when they are under a cloud.¹⁸

Netochka Nezvanova, who narrates the story of the same name, also proves herself an attentive physiognomist: she can 'perceive [her father's] least wish at a glance'.¹⁹ In the 1850s and 1860s Dostoevskii begins almost every description of a character by referring to the physiognomical study of his/her *lik*. The narrator of *The Village of Stepanchikovo* recalls that when granted his first sighting of the villainous Foma Fomich, he 'studied this gentleman with intense curiosity'.²⁰ In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskol'nikov tries to regain his mental equilibrium after the murders by focusing all his attention on a face he sees in an office: 'The clerk, on the other hand, he found intensely interesting; he wanted to guess everything by his features, penetrate the very heart of his being.'²¹

We find here a characteristic principle of the 'literary portrait' in Dostoevskii's works of the 1850s and 1860s. In the 1870s, however, the period of his greatest artistic maturity, Dostoevskii tends less and less to provide such direct indications of his characters' showing particular interest in physiognomical details. This process goes hand in hand with the development of Dostoevskii's distinctive style and is accompanied by fundamental changes in the composition and content of the 'literary portraits' of his characters in his works of this period: the forms he gives them become more varied and more extended; consequently, Dostoevskii's portraits of the 1870s, as seen in *A Raw Youth* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, are fundamentally different from the portraits in *Crime and Punishment*, *The Insulted and the Humiliated*, *The Idiot*, and *The Possessed*.

The quest to uncover the meaning and the moral profile of a specific *human face* was at the heart of Dostoevskii's life and writing. This was what guided his response to great paintings and it was in this vein that he created his own works, which were seen by his contemporaries as 'portrait galleries'. Any attempts to find prototypes for Dostoevskii's heroes only in his actual biography and the literature that preceded him are totally misguided. The point is that the writer also drew the basic physiognomic types for his literary heroes from painting. Dostoevskii's experience of the great artists –